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Photos from the Vault

These 13 women kept SLO’s railroad running during WWII. ‘A man’s job — but I can do it’

By **David Middlecamp**

January 11, 2025 5:00 AM | 2

Timelapse video from Amtrak's Pacific Surfliner train takes you from San Luis Obispo to Los Angeles in just six minutes.
By McClatchy



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Recent construction near West Grand Avenue and North Second Street in [Grover Beach unearthed soil](#) that had enough contamination for neighbors to smell.

There have been a several similar stories over the years, often associated with the railroad or [oil development](#). Other new discoveries have been associated with [dry cleaning chemicals](#) and [fire retardant foam](#).

In 1988, the Southern Pacific roundhouse area was identified as a cleanup zone. The railroad is now owned by Union Pacific.

The roundhouse was flattened shortly after the [end of the steam era in 1956](#), but the turntable had not yet been demolished, and the rail bed was black with oil in a photo.

Later, abandoned oil bunkers were discovered nearby when a real estate development was built next to the tracks.

That had to be cleaned up before the construction could continue.



Randy Miller, hazardous materials inspector, shows oil pollution around the old Southern Pacific roundhouse in San Luis Obispo on June 13, 1988. Robert Dyer *Telegram-Tribune*

When steam was king, the switching yard in San Luis Obispo was a major maintenance and repair hub.

Cuesta Grade out of San Luis Obispo was the steepest climb on the Coast Route, so a locomotive had to be up to the test.

World War II was probably the high-water mark for rail traffic in the region with Camp San Luis Obispo on a spur and troops and material for the war being transported across the nation and to ports on the Pacific coast.

With many men called to fight in the war, new categories of jobs were offered to women for the first time.

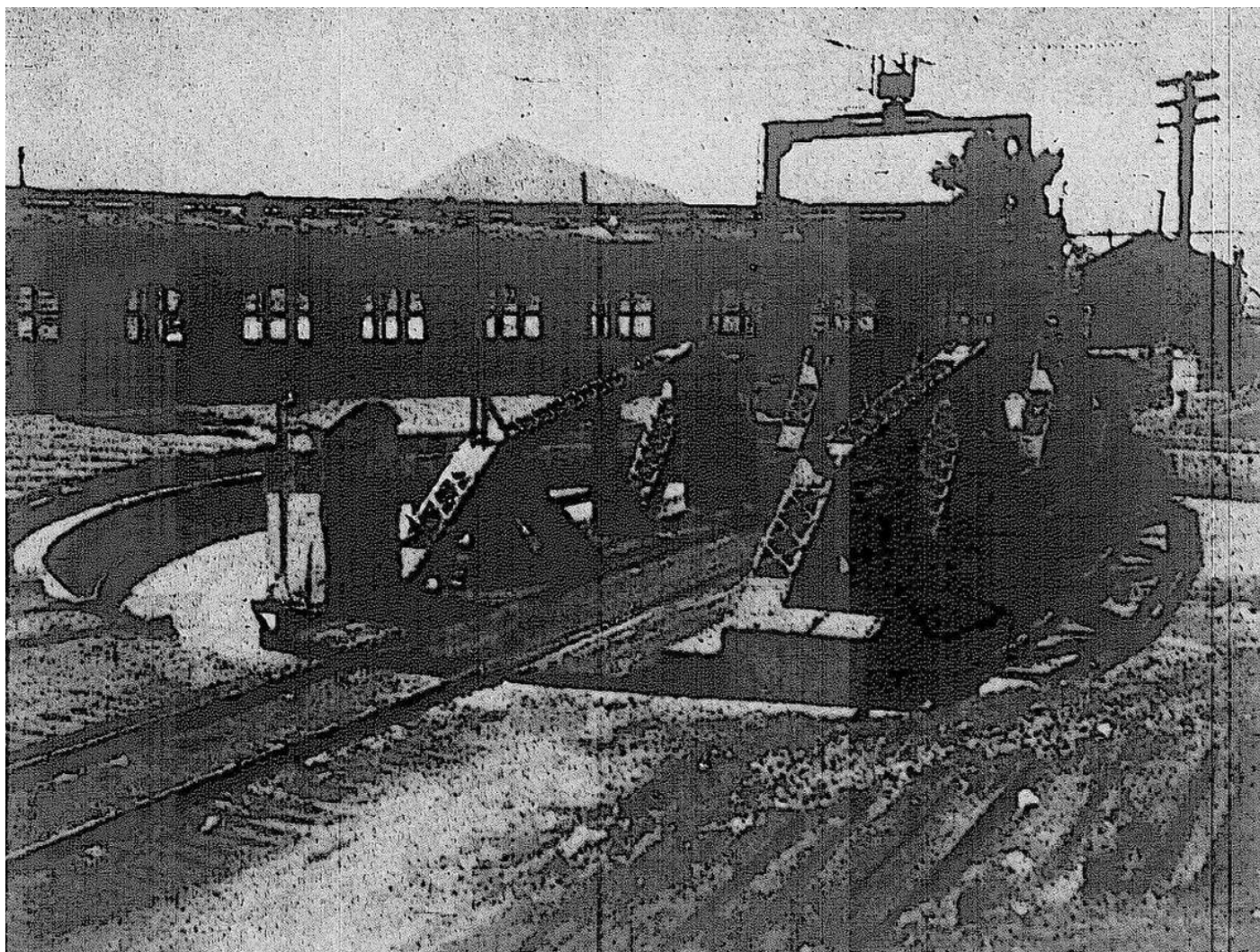
It was a sea change in the workplace where women could work at a well-paying job outside the stereotyped roles available before the war.

If we pass over some of the following article's patronizing observations, it offers a gritty insight into the everyday jobs that had to be done to keep a steam engine running.

On a society page that was filled with women's club news, a pattern for dress making, nursing aids, makeup tips, engagements and recipes, was the story of women who were interested in getting grease stains out of coveralls.

Their own coveralls.

Unfortunately no photos ran with this unbylined article of a local [Rosie the Riveter](#) story, which ran in the Telegram-Tribune on Feb. 29, 1944.



The turntable at the Southern Pacific switching yard in San Luis Obispo. Telegram-Tribune

Women go after 'manly' jobs of railroad roundhouse crew

It doesn't necessarily take a war or an emergency to draw women to occupations that appear to be exclusively man's.

This is being proved today by women of the roundhouse crew at San Luis Obispo's Southern Pacific railroad yard; women who are putting their desire to work at jobs hitherto denied them before their aim to serve in essential wartime capacities.

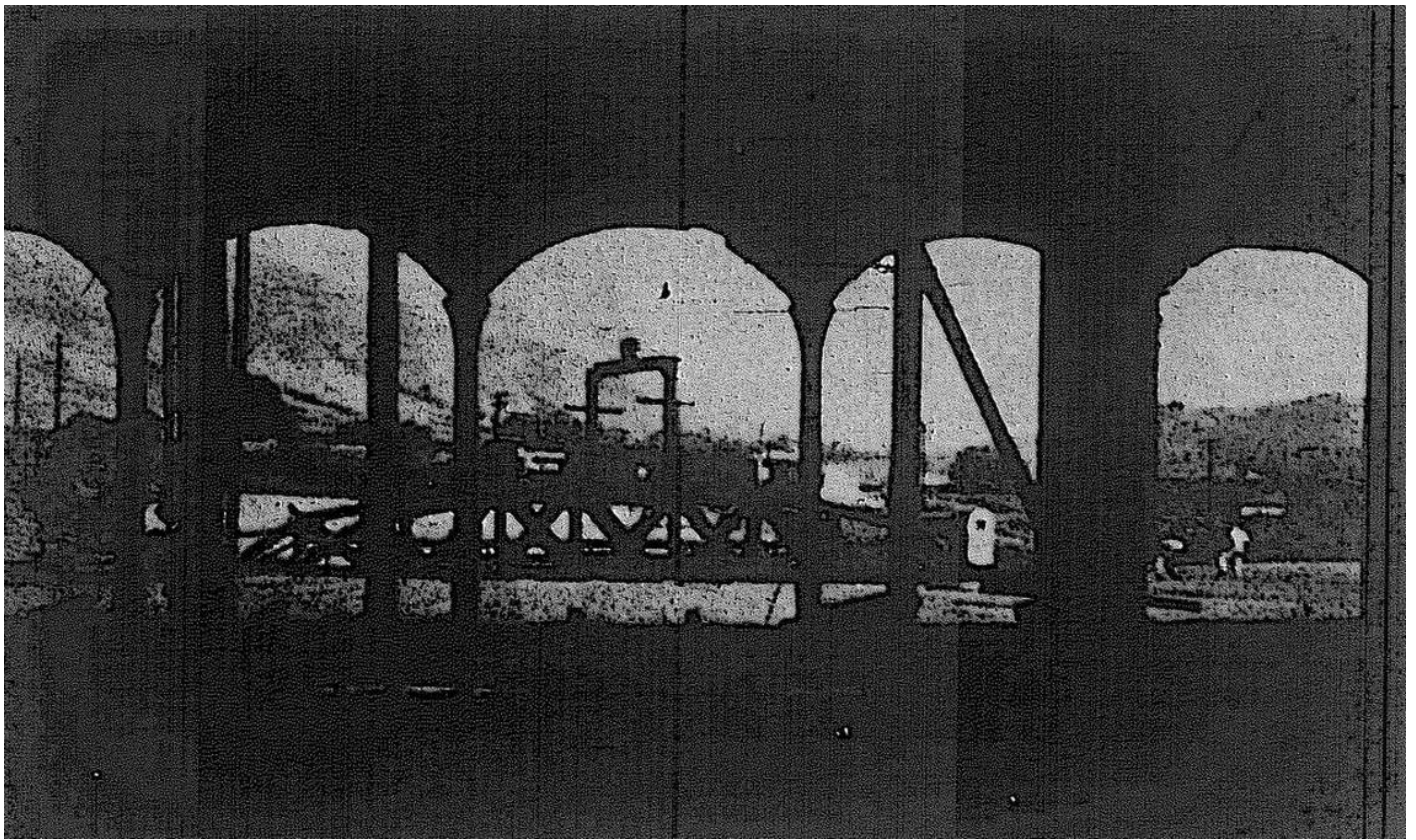
The 13 grease-streaked, overall-clad feminine "roundhousers" who work right along with the men in the roundhouse, where engines are brought for general overhauling, repairs and checkups, as machinists' helpers, showed a spark of the old feminine spirit when asked why they were at the hard, greasy work.

All of them, from the attractive twentyish Amy Warfield, still bubbling with enthusiasm of it all, having been on the railroad job only ten days, to the cheerful, vigorous Katie Nelms, a grandmother, gave synonymous answers to the inquiry, “Why did you seek work on the roundhouse gang?”

Their answers were straightforward — they weren’t going to miss their chance of doing something they never had a crack at before because it had been acknowledged by men as being for men only!

Typically women-like in their gratitude to their men colleagues for treating them with the same consideration as they (the men) give each other, the lively, alert group, praised “the fellows” for their cooperativeness in acquainting them with the many details of their jobs.

None of the women had previously worked at mechanical jobs. The majority of them were former office workers, laundry helpers and housewives.



The turntable at the Southern Pacific roundhouse, a merry-go-round of sorts which shuttled steam locomotives into the building, is framed in the photo above taken from inside the roundhouse. Telegram-Tribune

Ina Wansley, the first woman to be hired on the local crew, reporting there on Dec. 11, 1942, said of the men's attitude when she made her first appearance among them in overalls and kerchief, "They made no secret of resenting me, but I went right on with my work, and when they knew that I wasn't going to be fazed by their unwelcoming attitude, they assured me that neither they or the engines bite. From the very first they proved gentlemen, never using rough language around the girls, and always 'Johnnies on the spot' to give a helping hand with a heavy load."

Ina is now the only woman cellar packer in the crew. Her duties take her all over the engine, principally underneath it, checking the journals and grease boxes.

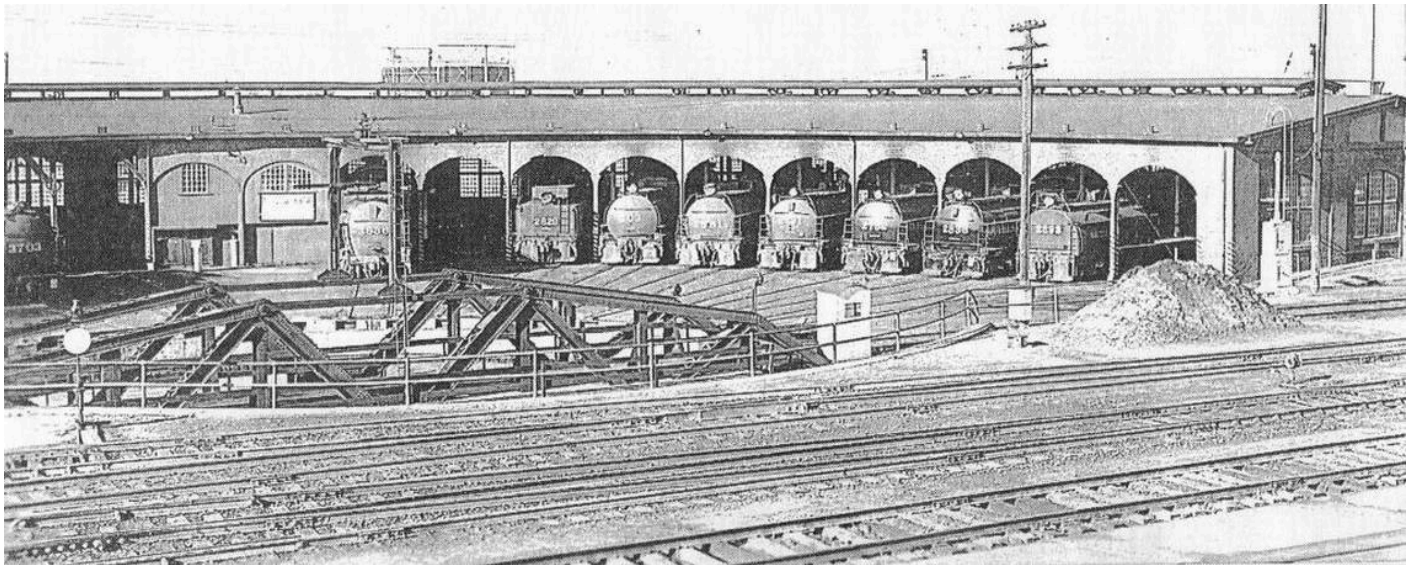
"Anyone on this job has to keep both eyes open, because missing one key might endanger the engine," said one of the other girls, explaining Ina's duties with pride.

Ina said, "It's what most people would term 'a man's job' — but I can do it."

Virginia Bruger, a lovely young soldier's wife, who, if one were typing occupationally, would describe her as "the ideal secretary type," said, "One of my girlhood ambitions was to get right into the heart of the whistling demons."

She did.

At present she spends hours a day oiling their brakes.



The San Luis Obispo Southern Pacific Railroad roundhouse in 1953. The last of Southern Pacific's steam locomotives pulled out of the roundhouse in September 1956. San Luis Obispo County Historical Museum

Then there is Nellie O'Neal, wife of a civilian employee at Camp San Luis Obispo and mother of two children. On the roundhouse crew for the past 14 months, her duties vary from the supply department, to the office and back to the engines.

"Engines fascinate me," she said. "They're all so different. To most persons they would appear identical, but when you get to know them, you find they are very much like individuals, needing specific care. Very much like children, I would say."

Although a member of the roundhouse crew, Evelyn Hobbs, a soldier's wife, finds that her duties don't differ much from those of the home-maker — instead of keeping the home fires burning, she keeps the engine's fires up. Evelyn watches the fires on inbound engines, making sure that the steam is kept at the correct temperature, until they are brought to the roundhouse.

There are others, Carrie Steele, mother of two children, the only woman boilermaker; Marjorie Wilson, wife of a soldier, who spends her days filling air pumps and dynamos; Elma Linn, a mother; Billy Mayfield, a soldier's wife; Rose Silvera, Donna Simpson and Lena Martin, all hardy, cheerful workers — and punctual, too, according to Lester Jaeger, roundhouse clerk — and why not? Didn't they get something they "wanted, but couldn't have?"

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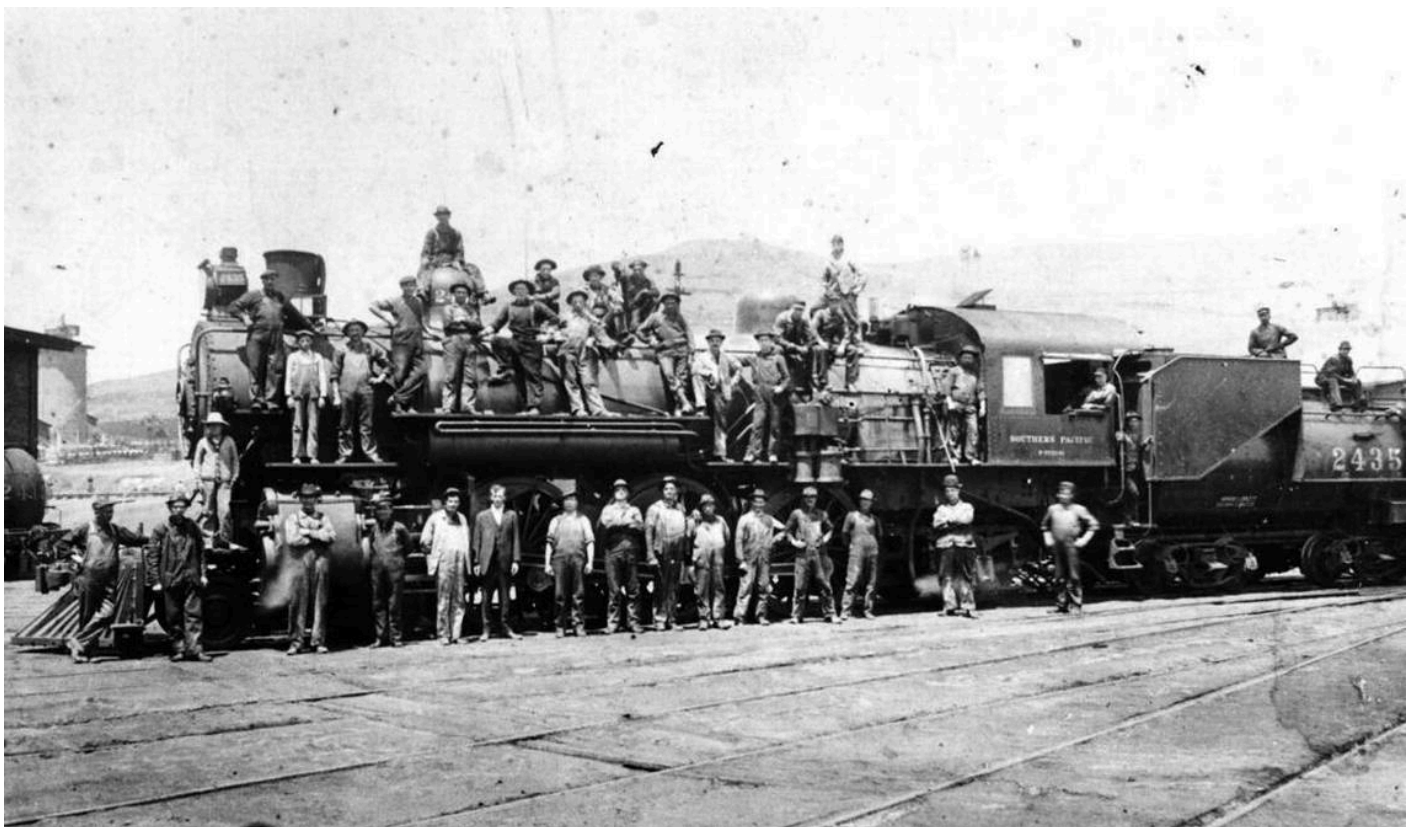


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The roundhouse crew of the Southern Pacific Railroad in San Luis Obispo gathers to have its picture taken when this new engine arrived to be put into service in 1913. File *Tribune*

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David Middlecamp is a photojournalist and third-generation Cal Poly graduate who has covered the Central Coast region since the 1980s. A career that began developing and printing black-and-white film now includes an FAA-certified drone pilot license. He also writes the history column "Photos from the Vault."

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UserBE34D7F 1 DAY AGO

Great find showing the value of merit and reciprocity . Though war is all about destruction and fragmentation of the enemy it also brought people together with common needs and goals.

So many stories like this from the WW II generation. The opposite of today's DEI. The attempted forcing of outcomes based on some classification that has nothing to do with...

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